

The Woman's College of
The University of North Carolina
LIBRARY



CQ
no. 550

COLLEGE COLLECTION

Gift of
Melinda Hiscox Carter

CARTER, MELINDA HISCOX. The Ritual and Other Stories. (1968) Directed
by: Dr. Robert Watson. pp. 65

This thesis consists of four short stories, the titles of
which are: "The Ritual", "The Celebration", "The Angels", and
"The Great Bridge." These stories are about the realities of people's
lives and their fantasies, and about the conflicts which arise when
these realities and fantasies overlap.

A Thesis Submitted to
the Faculty of the Graduate School at
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

Greensboro
Sep. 1968

Approved by

Robert Watson
Thesis Advisor

THE RITUAL
AND OTHER STORIES

by

Melinda Carter

A Thesis Submitted to
the Faculty of the Graduate School at
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

Greensboro
May, 1968

Approved by

Robert W. K. Long
Thesis Adviser

APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis has been approved by the following committee
of the Faculty of the Graduate School at The University of North
Carolina at Greensboro.

Thesis
Adviser

Robert T. Watson

Oral Examination
Committee Members

Robert T. Watson

Robert C. Stephens

Dr. J. W. Brown

Warner B. B. B. B.

April 19, 1968.

Date of Examination

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Warmest thanks and appreciation to Fred Chappell, Allen Tate, and Frances Gray Patton, who criticized and helped with these stories, and to Robert Watson, who took over in midstream.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

THE RITUAL	Page 1
THE CELEBRATION	Page 24
THE ANGELS	Page 38
THE GREAT BRIDGE	Page 56

THE RITUAL

In the tight uneasy writing class no one said anything for minutes and minutes, straining in the silence to think of something worth saying. The writing class met twice a week in the Science Building conference room - the only room on campus with a round table for discussion. Mr. Proctor sat staring at the story he had just read aloud, waiting for the comment which would bring the deeply buried meaning to the surface.

Karen, who thought of herself as "vivacious," stared at his bowed head in absolute hatred. She examined the white flakes scattered in his comb-furrowed black hair and on his brown jacket. His ears were crusty and his bony, white jaws needed shaving. She relished these visible signs of his inner disarray. She sensed his own distaste for her, for all the girls in the class, and for the whole idea of the writing class. She despised the class and Mr. Proctor and the other girls for making her endure this twice-weekly descent into hellish silence. Consciously cultivating openness and unweighed conversation, in this room she was stifled, self-conscious, and terrified by Mr. Proctor's obvious disdain and his evident foregone opinion that anything said by the girls would be silly, irrelevant, and shallow. She stared across the circle of girls at Jean, the fat girl who rarely spoke in class, who was making an irritating noise poking the cap of her ballpoint pen on and off, on and off.

Finally, she burst into words, her own voice making her wince in its defensive whininess. "I think it was a very good story. It began a little slowly, but the meeting between the boy and girl was very moving, very good. Only at the end, I wasn't sure what she meant. . ." Her voice faded as she lost the gist of her own thought, wishing she had kept her mouth shut.

Mr. Proctor said, spitting out each word, as if he hated it, "What do the rest of you think?" The moment's comfort which the girls felt while Karen spoke faded as the effort to say something began again.

Jean lay down her ballpoint pen and stared at Karen. Karen's feelings were vividly written in her expression - her frustration and her active hatred of Proctor. Her skin was flushed and a vein ticked in her neck. Jean, who was very plump with large peasanty features, was drawn to her finer, thinner lines. She looked like the last in a long line of aristocrats - all the fat and hairiness and crudity bred out. What was left was this tall, thin, pale blond girl with exaggerated arched eyebrows and thin elongated fingers. Her long, beautiful fingers ended in bitten, cracked fingernails.

Karen sensed someone's stare and jerked her eyes away from Mr. Proctor around the circle of girls to Jean. Jean smiled quickly to cover up for her absentminded gaze and Karen smiled back conspiratorily, thinking that Jean's smile was meant as sympathy for her blurted words. Karen mouthed silently, "I hate him," nodding her head in Mr. Proctor's direction with an exaggerated expression of bitter hate. Jean smothered her laugh in her hand, nodding agreement, then looked away shyly, as

though she had assumed too much. Then, after several silent minutes passed, she said out loud, looking at the ceiling, that she too liked a clean, well-lighted place. She said exactly that - "I too like a clean, well-lighted place," and then looked back down at her portion of the dark, scratched round table.

Karen didn't know what to make of Jean's statement until Jean glanced in her direction with a concealed smile. The rest of the class had looked up, startled, when Jean spoke, as they had at Karen's words, and had relapsed again into their semi-daze. Karen, though, was very excited by Jean's enigmatic words and look. Perhaps she had meant them as the beginning of a game, thwarting Mr. Proctor's attempts to make each class two hours of silent self-hatred. They would blurt out quotes or half-quotes at intervals, maybe even develop a code of hidden insults for Proctor or messages for each other, perhaps the rest of the class would catch on one by one and join the game. She caught Jean's eye again with a nod to reassure herself that her game idea was also Jean's. Even if it weren't her idea, Karen thought, we can start the game now.

Karen and Jean were not friends. They lived in different dorms and ran in different crowds. Karen had classified Jean with the large group of girls at Monroe College who were either too fat like Jean, or too thin, too shy, not pretty, usually bright but not brilliant, and studious. These girls, Karen found, lived in a limbo, and made up for being dateless by having many petty feuds, jealousies, and crushes among themselves. Karen didn't reclassify Jean now, but decided that

she must be somewhere on the fringe of that horrible group.

Mr. Proctor punched his arm into the air before him, then looked at his watch. "Class is almost over, and so far very little has been discussed about the story," he said sarcastically. "I suppose I should make a few comments before we leave. . . First of all. . ." He droned on outside Karen's thoughts until the bell rang and he broke off abruptly.

Jean waited tentatively outside the room for Karen. Karen joined her and they walked together toward the library. She offered Jean a cigarette, which she took, although she had never smoked before. Karen inhaled deeply, letting some of the smoke escape through her nose. "I loathe and detest that man. I'm afraid I'll have a heart attack or something unless I murder him."

Jean laughed. "He must be queer to hate girls so much. He can hardly stand to look at us, much less admit we have any sense."

They stopped outside the library to finish their cigarettes. Karen was quietly appraising Jean as they chatted, noticing her awkward handling of her cigarette and nervous, moving eyes. She had been struck by Jean's suggestion that Proctor was a queer, which put all the blame for the miserable class on him. Her own attitude had been to blame herself and the other girls and to feel guilty for not being able to please him. Jean's idea was much more satisfactory, she thought, and probably closer to the truth. Before they parted in the lobby, she whispered, "See you here tomorrow?"

Jean hesitated. "O.K. After lunch."

The next afternoon when Karen walked into the library, she saw Jean immediately, sitting in a lounge chair near the door. She jumped up before Karen could join her and whispered, "Let me show you a better place to study. Come on."

They were silent, as if they were still in the library, as they walked back toward the dorms and then turned sharply toward the basement entrance of the Alumnae House. Jean closed the door quietly behind them and put her finger to her lips for silence when Karen started to speak, then led her on tiptoe up the spiraling metal fire stairs to the third floor. Karen was astonished at Jean's daring and wondered why she'd never thought of exploring this building herself. Except for special meetings in the front parlor, students were never allowed in the Alumnae House. Jean eased the fire door open on the third floor. Karen saw a maid dusting in the hall and jumped back onto the stairs, but Jean whispered, "Come on, it's only Lucy Jane."

Lucy Jane saw them and whispered, "Hello, Miss Jean, the fire's burnin'."

Karen was bewildered when Jean opened a door to an exquisite little library full of lounging chairs and Oriental vases and ornaments. The walls were lined with old leather-bound books with gold lettering behind glass doors. There was an Oriental rug on the floor and a fire burning in the small fireplace. It seemed strange to Karen that they had to step down two steps from the hall level into the library. When Jean had closed the door behind them she said, still half-whispering, "We can talk out loud now. No one will hear us."

"But how did you ever find such a great place? Are you sure no one will come?"

"It's safe. Let's sit down. No one ever comes here but Lucy Jane and me."

"But what is it? I mean what's this library doing way up here?"

"I don't know exactly why it's here, but I do know that some rich old alumna way back, class of '08 I think, gave all these books and stuff to the college - and it's all antiques and very valuable, and a lot of the books are first editions and real old. The old lady gave it all to Monroe on the condition that they would duplicate the arrangement of her own living room where she kept all this stuff. This room's right in the middle of the building and doesn't have any windows, so the old lady was ticked off because she had beautiful handmade curtains in her room."

"Where did you ever learn about that?"

"Oh, in the alumnae files somewhere. Anyway, they want ahead and put all these curtains up and just keep them closed. Isn't it great? I've been coming here by myself for three and a half years now, and I hate for this June to come when I'll have to leave it. It's my inner sanctum. You won't tell anyone about it, will you?"

"Oh, no, of course not! . . . But what about Lucy Jane?"

"Well, that was a funny thing," said Jean, her eyes looking inward as she remembered. "When I first came here, I decided to explore every bit of this campus. Before my first year was up, I had been into every basement and attic and storage closet and janitor's room and

filing room, and even the furnace rooms and the pump house."

"How did you ever. . . ?"

"When I had to, I made friends with the grounds keepers and maids and pretended to be very interested in their work so they would show me around. And sometimes I took jobs like in the post office or washing test tubes in the lab, or helping type and file so I could get into all the offices and college files. But usually I could do most of my exploring on my own. If you really want to get into a janitor's room or a furnace room it's easy, because no one thinks anyone would ever want to get in."

"But how about this room?" Karen insisted.

"Well, the day I found this library, there was a fire all laid, so I lit a match to it, watched it a while, and then left. The next morning I came back and the hearth had been cleaned and a new fire laid. So I lit it again, but this time I stayed and watched the fire and read for several hours. I was caught off guard by Lucy Jane, whom I didn't know then, when she came in to clean."

"Oh, my gosh! What'd you do?"

"Well, she said real prissy like, 'Don't you all know this here room ain't for students?' (Karen laughed at her rendering of the Negro accent.) I played dumb and left, but I kept coming back - because I love this room - to find a time when Lucy Jane wouldn't be there. That's when I found out that Lucy Jane used the library for a three-hour snooze every afternoon. I came in one afternoon while she was asleep and sat and read 'til she woke up. She was really flustered

when she saw me and said, 'My goodness! I must have dozed off. Dear me!'
'Yeah,' I said and studied my watch, 'for exactly two hours and thirty-three minutes.' Well, she knew I had her so she got mad and said, 'You ain't supposed to be here anyways.' 'I know I'm not,' I answered, 'but neither are you.' She stood there staring at me, getting madder and madder, until I smiled, not the least bit sarcastically, and said, 'You work hard and you need to rest here in the afternoon, and I need a place like this to study. So why don't we help each other out?' She thought a minute and then smiled back as sweet as you please and we've been friends ever since."

"Oh, Jean, that's great! I'm so glad you let me come too."

They sat on the sofa facing the fire and began studying. With comprehensives only a few months away, they both felt the urgency of hard work, but neither could concentrate very long at a time. Several times Karen got up to wander around the room, reading some of the neatly typed labels beside objets d'art and pulling out a book here and there, turning the brittle pages. Once, Jean opened a small cabinet which had in it a teapot and the makings for instant coffee. She served the coffee in dainty flowered china cups on a silver tray.

Late in the afternoon when the fire had burned down and they were ready to leave, Jean washed the ashtrays and their cups in the small bathroom off the library, and pulled out fresh logs and kindling from the metal-lined closet beside the fireplace. "This is part of my agreement with Lucy Jane," she explained.

Outside, they found that it was raining hard. They ran through

the rain to Jean's room, zig-zagging along the path to avoid the long slimy worms the rain had flushed from the ground. Jean's room was neither clean nor light. It was full of canvases and paints and papers, very dark in the rain. Her desk was piled high with books and papers, and the lamp was on the floor. The walls and window of her narrow room were bare except for the wildly colored abstract paintings leaning against each other along the walls. Jean shoved some books off the chair so Karen could sit down, and cracked the window so they could hear the rain.

Karen compared the unconsciously bohemian mess in Jean's room with her mental picture of the contrived, arty clutter of her own big, airy room. She and her roommate, Augusta Rollins, had found a beatup, muddy-maroon Oriental rug - not at all like the one in the library - and some Indian floral curtains and bedspreads which they thought clashed pleasingly with the rug. They had covered their walls with wild and garish prints and with some of their own blotchy Art I abstracts. The care with which they had avoided collegiate travel posters and had included van Gogh's yellow flowers as a snobbish joke seemed now to Karen, sitting in Jean's unplanned room, like a middle-class housewife's affectations. She was surprised at herself that she didn't resent Jean - resentment being her usual reaction to someone she believed to be superior to herself. Remarkably, she felt relaxed even though she had begun to think of Jean as superior to herself in every way, except in looks - perhaps it was Jean's lack of beauty that kept her immune from Karen's resentment.

Jean sat at her desk staring out at the rain, smoking one of Karen's cigarettes, methodically teaching herself to inhale, taking a small amount of smoke into her mouth and pulling it farther down into her lungs with each drag. She watched Karen's experienced gestures as she smoked, imitating her and feeling shy before Karen's obvious sophistication. Even the way she sat displayed her casual sophistication, Jean thought, her slim legs crossed at the knees, one toe tapping to music from somewhere down the hall. Jean tucked her skirt more tightly around her fat thighs and pulled her legs farther under her desk.

"They're really good," Karen said, looking around at the paintings piled against the wall. "I can't ever paint because I'm too self-conscious, thinking about looking like an artist instead of concentrating on the painting."

"What do you mean?"

"It's the most maddening thing. Not just painting, but everything I do. Like the other day. I was sitting on a bench in Washington Square looking at the monument and the wet leaves in the fountain, but all I could see was myself sitting there looking. I almost believed someone was hiding in a bush watching me to see what I would do and probably thinking how sensitive I must be to appreciate the beauty of dead leaves. There's always someone watching me wherever I go, so I watch myself to see that whatever I do will seem good and poetic to the person in the bush."

"It's funny but I feel like you're watching yourself talking to me right now. You wouldn't make a good Catholic! I can imagine you

sitting in the confessional inventing elaborate sins to make yourself seem dramatic and exciting to the priest."

Karen laughed with Jean at that. "But how can I stop myself?"

Jean considered a moment before answering. "When ~~we~~ were in our library you didn't seem aware of yourself at all."

Karen's eyes widened at her perception as she realized that in the little library, in Jean's presence, she hadn't thought of herself for hours and hours. Later, walking back to her dorm in the drizzle she laughed at herself for attributing to Jean the mystical powers to free her from her watching other-self. Probably the simple fact that the library had no windows kept her from feeling self-conscious and watched. She remembered their plan to meet in the morning for coffee before class and felt embarrassed at her jittery excitement. It was corny, she thought, this strange feeling for Jean, like her trembling laughter on first dates. She sensed the beginnings of the dramatics which accompanied everything new or different that happened in her life. She had been too early trained in depth of perception, in meanings and symbols, ~~ever~~ to live on the surface of things or to be entirely present in the moment.

She had to laugh at herself for being so excited about this fat girl for a friend. She remembered at Scout camp having a crush on Obediah, the counselor with choppy hair and jeans who flicked her cigarette with her thumb like a man, assertive and assured. And now, she thought, she had a crush on Jean, just like the counselor. It was simply a crush on a girl - simply an attachment to fill a vacant

time between boyfriends, nothing else exciting to do.

Augusta wasn't in their room when Karen returned, so she crossed the invisible line dividing the room into her half and Augusta's half and stretched out across her bed. Augusta must be crying on Cindy's shoulder again, she thought, looking bitterly at the dirt and mess across the line. Augusta had always exaggerated her ignorance of housekeeping, cultivating the impression that she had been waited upon all her life by her parents and servants at "the plantation," as she called her home. Karen, after knowing Augusta for three years, now fully and completely despised her for her spoiled, demanding attitude, and most of all, for her Scarlett O'Hara complex - her heavy southern drawl and the cute coyness she affected. The mess had been even worse the past few weeks because Augusta had given herself up to self-pity. In six days, she would be tried by the college judicial board for plagiarism, and she had dropped all pretense of self-control in her fear of expulsion.

Karen lay sprawled across her bed, unconsciously chewing her thumbnail and hanging up Augusta's pile of clothes with her eyes. She pressed her hand between her legs and pulled upward against herself until she felt a brief ping of pleasure - which obliterated for a moment her watching other self. She pressed again and again until finally it wouldn't work any more.

Her mind wandered to Jean and she wondered vaguely, would I, if she wanted to - would I? - not knowing what Jean might want, but trying to imagine what girls would do who were in love with each

other. She pictured herself kissing Jean, putting her arms around Jean, but the image repelled her. She shook her head violently as if she were tossing off something material like a spider. But it was exciting to think that Jean might want her in that way. She visualized, without repulsion, Jean touching her, admiring her beauty, becoming aroused. It was just as satisfying to think of as her daydreams about boys. Her real dates, unlike her daydreams, were usually too matter-of-fact about their love making to let her enjoy the effect her beauty had on them. She had made the rule for herself never to sleep with a man she respected. If only Jean were a boy, she thought, it would be so simple, but if she were, it would be just the same old thing again. The way it was, it would have to be dreamlike - with only tender strings hooked to reality. Awareness would ruin it. She dozed off with her bitten thumbnail in her mouth.

She awoke late in the evening when Jean knocked on her door, and called out, "Come in?"

"Oh, I didn't know you were sleeping."

"Don't go! I'm wide awake now."

"Oh. Well, I just thought maybe you'd like to go into town for a beer and pizza."

"Great! Let me get my money."

They drove in Jean's old beetle-shaped car to Eagle's in town. While they ate and chatted, Karen mentally threw out her afternoon's daydream about Jean. It seemed far-fetched now and Jean seemed unaware of any undercurrents. Over their beer and cigarettes, she told Jean

14
about Augusta's case to be tried next Monday. Jean hardly knew Augusta,
but she and Karen made her salvation their project together. They
presumed to make something like "temporary insanity" her defense.

Every evening after that first discussion of Augusta, they
drove to Eagle's to drink beer and consider how to handle the case.
Talking with Jean about Augusta's predicament gave Karen hours of
pleasure at her own concern and desire to help. Augusta, who seemed
hopeless when they approached her with their idea, allowed them to
plan and plan while she bit her lips until they bled and slept and
slept to escape. They sat for hours drinking beer and smoking and
talking in the high round booth in the dark back room of Eagle's
filled with colored neon globes which glared but gave no light. They
played the juke-box and talked to the dirty old bartender who some-
times gave them beer and sometimes sat with them and told them of his
family which lived upstairs and had many delicious, horrible problems
like diseases and unwed pregnant daughters and alcoholic sons who
lost money at races, problems which combined and merged and revealed
themselves like serial stories, and Jean and Karen listened, egging
him on, savoring his misery, delighting in his and Augusta's dilemmas,
very much removed, set apart by their special feeling for each other.

One night at Eagle's after many beers, (excuses - they were
drinking excuses and qualifications), as they sat together at their
table talking, talking, their fingers touched, and Karen watched them
touch and couldn't decide if it were an accident or if Jean knew
they touched. And finally Jean said, "Let's get out of here." They

paid and got in Jean's car and drove back to the parking lot and Jean turned the engine off. Karen sat, quiet, staring straight ahead at the black outlines of trees against the blacker sky, feeling as if she were with a boy on a first date, heady and scared of herself, and then embarrassed and silly, wondering if Jean would hate her if she knew what she was thinking.

And then Jean suddenly fell sideways with her head in Karen's lap, saying in a laughing, comradely way that she was so tired and high she couldn't hold herself up any longer, half-lying there, very still, ambiguous, covered. And Karen, almost resignedly, stroked Jean's hair and felt nothing except the electricity of her hair. Then she felt very stupid and silly, seeing herself sitting in a dark car with a girl, stroking her hair. She knew of no precedent to follow, so she sat hesitating until, still feeling stupidly like a date, she said she thought they'd better go. They got out and said goodnight quickly, not looking at each other, finding it impossible to appear casual.

After that the dramatics began. They said, "I love you," to each other many times, needing those easy words to classify and justify their feelings. They stayed together, studying in their library, rarely talking, rarely touching. They could almost joke together, Jean winking and saying, "Hey, doll," and they both could laugh. Karen felt something strong, maybe not love, but romantic, idealistic, heightening, for Jean. She could admit to curiosity - a desire to follow the course of this attachment to its end. She draped this real feeling with a curtain of romanticism. It would have a marvelous effect on her friends

to know, she thought. She playacted for Augusta, Augusta in her unseeing, sleepy misery. She dramatized herself, trying to appear different, abstracted.

They talked less of Augusta, more of themselves, Karen making Jean her confessor, telling her of the boys she had slept with, talking mostly of sex and love and of all those things which she knew were sins but of which she was proud as being her own and being shocking. Once she told of the boy who had said to her, "Why are you being so cold? After all, we've slept together before." And about how she had laughed out loud, giving it away that she had forgotten this one. Jean spoke little of herself and seemed embarrassed when she could confess no experiences with men.

They made everything they did into a ritual - a certain Charlie Byrd record on the juke-box, certain expressions. And first a bird and then a rooster came to be their symbol. They were less embarrassed to kiss, to touch hands, to touch each other - very delicate, unspeaking, in Jean's dark messy room in the afternoon when the halls were empty, at night in Jean's car.

When they kissed and when Jean touched her, Karen was excited, but she was disappointed most of all. She decided that Jean knew as little as she did about what girls should do together. She found it tedious that Jean's body was so much like her own. And when she felt Jean's hands shaking and heard her voice trembling, she was embarrassed and offended. Jean's passion seemed ridiculous and their love making piddling and corny. She hadn't heard phrases like "My darling! My

darling!" since she and her dates had tried them out in high school. Yet, she wanted to be with Jean all the same. She felt the same excitement about Jean as she had when they first talked. At Eagle's she drank more beer so that later, in the car, she could pretend to be high and sleepy. That way, she didn't have to say anything or do anything. She could enjoy Jean's love making, sometimes pretending Jean was a boy, and sometimes exciting herself at the bizarre idea that a woman could be so aroused by her.

Neither Karen nor Jean could appear before the judicial board in Augusta's defense, but they had written a letter which they presented to the Dean on the day of the trial. They sat with Augusta on a bench in the hall outside the conference room while the board met inside. Augusta's lips were bitten and bleeding and her eyes were wild and staring. Karen noticed that in spite of her dark circles and filthy, uncombed hair, Augusta looked better than she had ever seen her. Augusta was pretty in a weak, dimpled way that reminded Karen of pinafores and giggles. Now, though, her worrying and losing weight had sharpened all her lines and hollowed her cheeks, making Karen think she would have a beautiful skull.

The Dean called Augusta into the conference room, and, half an hour later, opened the door for her to come out. She had been crying, and she motioned for Karen and Jean to follow her out of the building before they talked. "Thank God that's over."

"Tell us quick. What did they say?" asked Karen.

"At least I'm not expelled," Augusta answered as if she were talking to herself. "I'm to finish out the year, but no credit for this term. I'm suspended one year under psychiatric care they said."

"Yea! Our letter worked!" Karen yelled.

Jean said, "You can take a year's vacation and come back the next year to finish."

Augusta turned around to look at them for the first time and said in a quiet, hard voice, "Do youall really believe I would ever come back here after this?" She turned away, not expecting an answer, looking straight ahead. "I'm going to pack. Karen, please have my trunks shipped to me. I'm leaving on the next plane I can get. See you later."

Karen looked at Jean and shrugged her shoulders as Augusta walked away from them. Jean looked away as if she were beginning to understand what Augusta had been through.

With the trial over and Augusta gone, Karen and Jean turned their thoughts more completely into themselves. They discussed their childhoods and analyzed their relationship, each admiring the other's mind and sensitivity. The idea for the quotation game in writing class had fallen through after a few half-hearted irrelevancies. Mr. Proctor seemed indifferent to their interruptions of the silence, and the other girls had receded so far into their own thoughts that they rarely noticed the sudden words. Karen had moved around the circle next to Jean. They carried on ritual conversations, writing in their notebooks pages and pages, each notebook filling with one side of their

dialogue. Karen would write "Hi!" in her notebook, then Jean wrote "Hi!" in hers. Karen would write, "Did you dream last night?" And Jean would answer, "Yes."

"What?"

"About a bear."

"What about it?"

"We were lying in the grass eating dandelions when a bear came and killed us."

"What does it mean?"

"I don't know. Hidden fear, I guess."

They always ended their written conversations with their ritual word "Skio," which they had found out meant "I love you" in Japanese.

As the days became warmer, they spent less time studying in their library, often cutting classes in the afternoon to walk in the woods. Jean tried to talk Karen into driving to the park instead of walking around the campus where they would be seen. She was afraid their friends would begin to talk about them if they were seen together so often, but Karen was defiant. She said that she wasn't afraid of gossip - she would walk where she liked. She had observed that her friends had begun to look at her speculatively and she relished their careful avoidance of Jean's name. She wanted them to wonder and to sense, however vaguely, the drama and high tragedy of her life - her unspeakable and inherently futile love.

Karen came to Jean's room every morning to walk with her to class and one morning Jean said, "Let's don't go to class." They sat down, Karen mystified by Jean's solemn expression. Finally, Jean said,

"I have a confession to make. . . . This has happened to me before. I have to tell you. And now I know you'll hate me so just go and don't say anything."

Karen was shocked into silence, not so much by the confession as by the finality in Jean's voice. She almost blurted out that it didn't matter, but she stopped herself and very calmly sat back in her chair and lit a cigarette. She said in a cool, noncommittal voice, not giving in too soon, "Tell me about it, Jean."

"I guess I'll have to tell you, but I don't know what to say, . . ."

Karen took long drags of her cigarette, trying to prevent her hand's shaking and giving away her excitement.

Jean began again, "It's just that I've always been this way. Seeing the slim, hard bodies of little girls with their tight little breasts and long necks and not admitting to myself what I felt. Until once at the beach, a little girl in the next cottage liked me and hung around with me and I'd pretend to act like a mother, holding her hand and hugging her. Only once I crushed her too hard and she seemed to sense what was happening and looked at me with those childish knowing eyes and said, "You're awful," and never came near me again."

". . . Well, is that all? When I was at camp I. . . ."

"No, it's not all. . . Here at school with Alice."

"For God's sakes, Alice? But why Alice? She's so fat and ugly."

"Well, she's like me and I guess we just found each other."

"Found each other?" Karen repeated incredulously. She was trembling in humiliation to think that Jean had put her in a category

with horrible Alice.

"I didn't really mean we found each other. We recognized each other for what we were and. . . It was my first year here. . . I hated her the whole time. . . It wasn't like with you. I mean that." She looked at Karen with an expression Karen recognized as the shy self-deprecating glance of the first day they had noticed each other in writing class. Karen wanted to reach out and comfort Jean, now that she was reassured that Alice had been a very different thing. She wanted to erase Jean's whipped dog expression, but still she held back.

"Well, now you know," Jean said, "and now it's over."

"Do you want it to be over?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because it's wrong and I want to be like everybody else. With you it's just an escapade. With me it's something else."

"But we can't just say, 'That's it. So long.' - can we?"

"I want it over," Jean repeated.

Karen stood up, dramatic, serious. "Do you mean it? If you say so I can do it. You say the word and I'll walk out of here and I'll never come back. It's up to you. Do you really want it over?"

Jean, very quiet, almost inaudible, "Yes."

Karen reached down and took Jean's hand and said very softly, "O.K.," but Jean didn't look up, even as Karen walked out and shut the door.

She walked back to her room and stood looking out the window,

feeling totally isolated, from her friends and from the meaning of being at school as well as from Jean. Her old routine of studying and loafing and dating before she had met Jean seemed entirely foreign now and impossible to resume. She stayed in her room all afternoon, not caring to act out her sadness and aloneness, but acting nevertheless by staying in her room, sitting and staring and waiting for evening to walk alone in the woods.

In the morning, Karen walked to writing class by herself, purposely arriving late so that she could look in and leave without being seen if Jean weren't there.

When she came to the door she saw Jean jump at seeing her as though an electric shock had gone through her. She sat down and watched Jean avoid looking at her. She passed Jean the cartoon that she had torn out before and they had laughed about. It was a sketch of a Good Humor truck and a car both smashed to bits, and ice cream strewn all over the road. The Good Humor man was smiling and saying, "You sure did give my truck a smack, didn't you?" Jean smiled when she saw it and wrote something on it and passed it back without looking up. She had added a bubble leading from the other man's mouth which said, "Sorry bout that. Let's eat the ice cream before it all melts."

She looked up then, sharply, amused, to watch Karen read what she had written. Karen smiled back, filled with tremendous hidden laughter, the joke wonderful and comic beyond reason.

She knew it had to end one day, and probably one day soon.
 But not yet. Let it swing along a little and then die gracefully.
 Let it swing along til then.

THE CELEBRATION

The first time I saw Frank's room was the night Mrs. Tobbs gave a party for him. Frank had just been promoted to assistant professor of English, so Mrs. Tobbs was giving him a celebration dinner. Frank had invited several of his associates on the faculty of Monroe College and their dates. I was the only one invited from out of town. I flew up from Stratford College for the occasion. It was a thrill to think of being the only student among all Frank's professor friends. I was a freshman and had met Frank only a few months before during Christmas vacation. It was fascinating that a professor found me interesting enough to visit and write and now to invite me to this celebration.

Frank was Mrs. Tobbs' only boarder and it was only because she knew his mother that he was there at all. She was a widow with some social standing in Huntington, and having a professor as her "house guest" enhanced that standing.

Frank's room was originally the attic of Mrs. Tobbs' Victorian house on Canterbury Trail. The attic was dry and dusty with a low ceiling and narrow windows, but it had the charm of a poet's garret, softened by Mrs. Tobbs' additions of wine-colored curtains, a blue and wine-red Oriental rug, and old paintings and lithographs scattered over the walls. The shape of the room was irregular, narrowing into small areas conforming to the cupulas and towers of the Victorian

architecture.

Frank's books and collection of wines and his preference for dim, shaded lamps gave the room a soft mellow look like sweet chianti. I relaxed at once in the room after the screeching, rattling atmosphere of the women's dormitory at school. Frank poured some wine for us and put on a record of Johnny Coltrane's sax, and then brought out my latest letter to analyze. I always wrote pages and pages for the fun of going over them later. The process usually took us hours, going over each item in order, Frank asking me to explain what I meant by this or that, and then telling me what the thought had reminded him of, some poem or character or situation in a play. And then we'd try to explain our feelings for each other, what I had meant by closing with "Best love" - was that flippant? - didn't I write the same to my sister?

In his room it was even better, because when Frank was reminded of a particular passage, he could reach right for it. I never wrote about what I had been doing, but about my thoughts so he could enlarge them for me. Frank was not the least condescending to me except physically. He was very tall, and his head was extremely large for his long, thin body, almost freakishly large with fine dark hair and large features. His habit of stooping slightly with his enormous head tilted forward made him appear even more top heavy.

In the letter we were looking at I had said something about being so easily convinced that my immediate companion, whoever he was, was right about everything, that I considered myself wishy-washy.

Frank said excitedly, "The darling!" I couldn't understand. Then he said, "By Chekov - 'The Darling'" - and kneeled down to look into his bookcase. He said into the bookcase, "She had that quality of absolute devotion to the present which is so rare. You shouldn't lose it. Don't try."

He made me read the story and then we talked and talked until my mind ached from jumping from thought to thought and straining to reach everything he said. The guests wouldn't arrive for another hour and already I was heady with talk and music and wine and smoke. Frank talked on about some new novel by Capote while I felt my eyes glazing over and my throat itching in my desire to giggle. I leaned back in the chair and tried to look interested and then I tried to look seductive to see if I could lure him from his talking, but as usual I couldn't. He always acted as if my flirtations were too childish to be bothered with.

I fell asleep while he was still talking and jerked awake later to find that it was dark and beginning to rain. Frank was sitting by the window reading. Almost at once I heard the doorbell ring below, so I hurried down to comb my hair and put on lipstick. I was afraid of running into Mrs. Tobbs after spending all afternoon in Frank's room - she seemed so old-fashioned and proper. But she had been so busy with the dinner and getting ready that I decided she probably hadn't given me a thought.

All except two of the guests had arrived together and were still standing in a group at the door introducing themselves to

Mrs. Tobbs and dripping from the rain when Frank and I came down. Mrs. Tobbs was smiling and chatting but her eyes were desperate. She had probably been expecting Brooks Brothers intellectuals, maybe carrying a book or two, and certainly smoking pipes. Frank himself dressed in natty tweeds and usually carried a briefcase. I was shocked myself when I saw what colleges are hiring these days. At Stratford, we thought that Mr. Kamber was offbeat for sucking his moustache and riding a bicycle. Frank had told me about his friends in the English department, but he hadn't prepared me for their appearance.

Kim, the one Mrs. Tobbs was trying not to stare at, looked like Jesus - long, light brown hair and beard, square jaw and full, pouty lips, and wet blue eyes. He was wearing a white cape-like raincoat and kept wetting his lips, not saying anything. His date, Eberlie I think, was fat and had acne and disguised her thick ankles with dark stockings and high heels. She was very polite and said, "How do you do" over and over.

Another one, Seymore Collins, had curly reddish hair and a redder beard and had on wrinkled, dirty corduroy pants and a moth-eaten red lumber jacket. He strode around the living room and then turned back to the group and said, "Shit, man! This is cool!" Mrs. Tobbs held on tightly to the back of a chair. Seymore's wife, Melanie, had long straight black hair and a very short skirt and black stockings. She kept flipping her hair out of her face and blinking her eyes, which had great black circles drawn around them.

I felt very sorry for Mrs. Tobbs. She reminded me so much

of my mother and had such an earnest smile as she tried to be charming. I asked her to let me help her in the kitchen, leaving Frank to mix drinks for the guests. Herlene, the maid, was working in the kitchen. I whispered to Mrs. Tobbs, "Aren't they awful?" Mrs. Tobbs grabbed my arm and almost hugged me she was so glad to hear me say that. I suppose to her I was the closest thing to a human being in the group. Any doubts she might have had about my behavior had been erased for good by the motley group in the living room.

"It's bad upbringing. That's what it is," she whispered. "No discipline when they're young, and look what you get. I'm glad I'm getting nearer the grave. It's getting worse and worse."

I helped her arrange the salads and light the candles. It made me sad to see the flowers and the beautiful silver and china. We called the rest of them to the table. They were laughing and talking and brought their drinks with them, all except Frank. Mrs. Tobbs knew that a blessing would be inappropriate, so to avoid an embarrassing pause she took the first bite of her salad when everyone was barely seated. Finally, someone thought to introduce Tony and his date Fran, who had arrived while we were in the kitchen.

Tony was sitting next to me and was the most powerful looking and most beautiful man I had ever seen. He looked dark and bold with thick black hair and shocking blue eyes. He was dressed something like a seaman, all in navy with brass buttons and clumpy black boots. He was an instructor in the dramatics department, he told me, and had been in a movie with John Wayne. He was obviously Italian and even

of my mother and had such an earnest smile as she tried to be charming. I asked her to let me help her in the kitchen, leaving Frank to mix drinks for the guests. Herlene, the maid, was working in the kitchen. I whispered to Mrs. Tobbs, "Aren't they awful?" Mrs. Tobbs grabbed my arm and almost hugged me she was so glad to hear me say that. I suppose to her I was the closest thing to a human being in the group. Any doubts she might have had about my behavior had been erased for good by the motley group in the living room.

"It's bad upbringing. That's what it is," she whispered. "No discipline when they're young, and look what you get. I'm glad I'm getting nearer the grave. It's getting worse and worse."

I helped her arrange the salads and light the candles. It made me sad to see the flowers and the beautiful silver and china. We called the rest of them to the table. They were laughing and talking and brought their drinks with them, all except Frank. Mrs. Tobbs knew that a blessing would be inappropriate, so to avoid an embarrassing pause she took the first bite of her salad when everyone was barely seated. Finally, someone thought to introduce Tony and his date Fran, who had arrived while we were in the kitchen.

Tony was sitting next to me and was the most powerful looking and most beautiful man I had ever seen. He looked dark and bold with thick black hair and shocking blue eyes. He was dressed something like a seaman, all in navy with brass buttons and clumpy black boots. He was an instructor in the dramatics department, he told me, and had been in a movie with John Wayne. He was obviously Italian and even

had a slight accent, but he had played a Mexican outlaw in the movie. I must have looked impressed when he told me about John Wayne, because with the most wonderful pride he pulled out of his jacket a photograph of a scene in the movie.

"That's me and that's John Wayne," he said. Then Melanie on his other side blinked her black circles and asked to see the picture. Mrs. Tobbs was talking with Eberlie, the fat, polite one, and didn't seem to notice the conversation going on between Kim-Jesus and Seymore. Seymore kept saying to Kim, "Shit, man! No kidding!" Frank was staring at me very intently from the other end of the table. I suppose he had noticed my admiration of Tony.

After Herlene cleared the soup dishes, she lit the gas heater under the silver chafing dish in the middle of the table and served chunks of raw steak in little individual bowls. Mrs. Tobbs then explained, "The object is to put a piece of steak on your long fork and then dip it in the butter and spices in the chafing dish so you can cook it just as you like it. I think it will be fun, don't you?" Mrs. Tobbs was breathless in this last attempt to make the dinner the cheery, comfortable party she had envisioned. I held my breath but Seymore didn't say anything.

We all started cooking the meat, Tony making a big production of it. He growled and stabbed a piece and lunged at the chafing dish yelling "Toro!" Even Mrs. Tobbs had to smile at his enthusiasm. He smiled back at her with such a warm tender smile that she seemed very young as she glanced away from him. He stood up then and toasted

"our charming and gracious hostess" with his wine, and sitting down he turned to me and said, "And I toast your warm young beauty in the custom of my country." I mumbled "thank you" and forked another piece of steak.

Tony and I talked all through dinner. He told me about his year in Hollywood. "They have no heart out there, no love. Cold calculating businessmen only."

"I suppose you're used to more open displays of emotion," I said, almost gasping from the hot steak and from my quick fantasy of Tony displaying his emotion.

He leaned toward me and put his arm around the back of my chair. I could see my pulse pounding in my wrist. He said, "I will tell you the truth. For three generations my family has been American. I only talk like I do because it's expected. People expect me to say "Mama Mia" all the time and to have a leetle accent and I don't want to disappoint them. . . But my emotions, they are from the heart." He pressed his hand to his chest and looked up at the ceiling. He leaned even closer to my ear and my head swayed toward him. "Such as you," he whispered, "I am in love with you because your heart is beating so fast like a bird." I glanced at Frank. He looked away and stared at the chunks of red meat.

Fran, Tony's date, sitting across the table said, "Oh, Tony, have you ever made love in a movie?" He started describing the orgy in "Sodom and Gommorah." He was in the upper left-hand corner of the screen all during the scene, squeezing grape juice into his mouth and

falling into the pond with various women. Polite Eberlie had bright staring eyes as she listened to Tony, ignoring Mrs. Tobbs' description of the recipe for Caesar salad. Melanie looked out from under her long black hair, paying close attention to Tony's description. Then she turned to Seymore and said that Sodom was probably a play on the word "sodomy." Seymore said, "That's what I like!" Kim-Jesus seemed to have a cold and kept pressing his handkerchief to his eyes and nose, not saying anything, and eating only little bits of bread and sipping wine.

Frank looked as if he were hypnotized by the chunks of steak. Without looking at anyone, he suddenly shoved his chair away and walked quickly toward the stairs. Mrs. Tobbs said, "Oh, my goodness!" and anxiously followed him upstairs. Tony poured more wine into my glass and said, "He looked pretty sick, didn't he?" Fran was pushing an olive around her plate and looking up at Tony now and then. Mrs. Tobbs came back with the news that looking at the raw meat had made Frank feel ill.

After dessert we went to the living room for coffee and liqueurs. Tony sat down beside me. I couldn't decide whether or not to go upstairs. Mrs. Tobbs called me into the kitchen and asked if I didn't think I should check on Frank. Her motherly face was screwed into an expression of bitter martyrdom. I recognized her mood easily from her overly courteous voice and her strained smile just like my mother's. Whenever a person failed to live up to my mother's expectations - and they inevitably failed - she, like Mrs. Tobbs, became

absurdly cheerful and polite.

Mrs. Tobbs carried dishes from one counter to another while she chattered, Herlene grudgingly stolid at the sink. "I never dreamed it would be up to me to keep the conversation on a high level. Imagine! Grown men and women, who teach our children, talking about John Wayne and sex movies!" said Mrs. Tobbs. Her expression softened as she continued, "When I was young, our group would talk for hours about great literature and history and philosophy." I had a moment's vision of prim straight-backed girls propounding Plato's ideas to their starched dates.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Tobbs," I said, feeling truly wretched about the botch of an evening, and particularly about Frank's petty behavior, walking out like that. I didn't know where I stood with anyone. I felt sorry for Mrs. Tobbs and wished I hadn't lost her respect. I was annoyed with Frank, but I was sure my flirtation with Tony had caused his rude departure. I felt guilty about flirting, but Tony was very attractive and I was tired of being intelligent all the time.

When I returned to the group, Fran had taken my seat beside Tony, but he patted a stool beside him so I sat there. I noticed that Kim was missing, but in a minute he came downstairs and told us Frank was lying down and wouldn't get up. A moment later Fran walked casually over to the hall bookcase and then suddenly walked up the stairs. She looked angry when she came back but she didn't say anything. A little later Seymore wandered up and back. And finally everyone had been up to see Frank except Tony and me. No one mentioned the comings

and goings. I couldn't stand it any longer, so I left Tony and climbed the three flights to his room.

Frank's room was dark and I could barely hear Johnny Coltrane's whailing sax. Frank looked grotesque. He was too tall for his huddled dejection to be effective. "So you came too, didn't you, darling," he said sarcastically. "So you thought you would have the power to bring me downstairs. You! You've come up here just like the others thinking you're most worthy to drag me down, just like the others. Mrs. Tobbs tried to mother me down the stairs. Kim appealed to me in the name of brotherhood and Fran expected me to follow her twitching behind. Now, what's your game?"

I was furious at his sneering. "I don't know," I said, "but I resent being classified with those birds downstairs. You act like you're some god peering down at us and I don't like it. I'm not one of them and you know it!"

"Ol' one-act Tony. You're taken in like all the rest. He's nothing but a two-bit wop with his phony accent and big line."

"I'm not taken in. I know what he is. I was just trying to be friendly to your guests. I could never be interested in him." I walked over and sat beside him. I wanted to reason with him and let him see that I really sympathized with him. I said, "I want to be with you. I don't give a damn about your nutty friends, including Tony."

I heard clumping on the stairs and then Tony yelled up, "Hey, amigo, let our sick friend get some rest. Come on back and join the party."

I turned toward the stairs and then back toward Frank, who looked so miserable and bitter. As I stood there hesitating, I realized suddenly that this was not simply a choice between two men. Tony was no longer Tony to me, but rather, a sex symbol, and Frank had become a symbol of the intellect. I had a strong sense of self-importance at finding myself in such a serious dilemma. My natural impulse was to race down the stairs to Tony, but my almost completed year of college had taught me the superiority of this loftier realm of the mind and Frank. I sat down beside him and took his hand. "I'll stay up here with you."

Frank jerked his hand away from mine. "I don't give a damn whether you go or stay," he said, spitting out his words. "Do you think I feel ill because of your little affair with Tony? Ha! Ha! Ha!" His laugh was strained and unamused. "Tony will appreciate that."

"Tony?"

"Yes, Tony. Don't you understand yet?"

"Understand what? About him? I thought you said he's just a phony."

"He is a phony. That's what I'm saying. He doesn't give a damn for you. He's getting even with me for going out with Seymore last night."

"Seymore! What's Seymore got to do with it? What do you mean 'getting even'?"

"I didn't want to tell you, but your little preenings and vanities have forced me to it. . . You see this ring? It's a Monroe College class ring."

"I see it."

"I didn't go to Monroe College."

". . . Did Tony?"

"Yes. Now do you understand?"

"I think so. . . Is Seymore. . . like that, too? And Kim?"

"Yes, my dear."

"Well, what am I doing here?"

"You're my cover, of course."

"Do the other girls know?"

"Oh, yes. They know. Unfortunately, Melanie didn't find out until after she married Seymore, but she doesn't care any more."

"Well, I think this is a dirty trick. Just what am I supposed to do now?"

"I don't know. Whatever you like." Frank seemed perfectly at ease, almost as if he were proud of his admission.

I turned and walked slowly down the stairs. I wanted to get away from Frank before I cried or screamed or whatever I might do. I was surprised at my own reaction. Instead of feeling shocked by his disclosure, all I felt was humiliation and embarrassment that I was the only one too dumb and naive to know. I paused on the second floor when I heard Tony's laugh and the conversation below. I dreaded seeing them again. As I started down, Mrs. Tobbs stepped out of her bedroom.

"Oh!" she said, seeing me. "Come in! How's Frank? I think his friends will be leaving soon. I was just freshening up. I just had to get away. I couldn't bear to listen to them another minute."

I hope they'll be leaving shortly."

I followed her into her room and sat down on the edge of her bed. I watched her stare at herself in the mirror as she blanketed her dark circles with powder. "I'm exhausted," she said. "This dinner party has aged me considerably." Her eyes were sunken and defeated looking, and her gray hair, which had been so neatly coiffed, now stood out in wisps around her face, but she still held her shoulders gracefully erect.

She glanced at me in the mirror. "You look tired yourself. Why don't you lie down in here for awhile? I'll say goodnight below and make us some hot tea."

"That would be wonderful." I felt secure and protected in the charge of this woman who was completely innocent of what was going on above and below her. She covered me with a quilt and turned out the lights.

"Rest your eyes," she whispered. "I'll be back with the tea after while."

"Thank you."

I could barely see the walls of the room in the dim light. I could almost make out the pattern of the wallpaper - a basket of gray roses, a bouquet of gray jonquils, a basket of gray roses. . . a crack ran down one wall, partially disguised by the paper. In one place, if it weren't for the paper a large patch of plaster would have fallen out. I decided that the paper was dishonest, hiding the real delapidation of the room - but I preferred the pretty monotonous

paper to the ugly, irregular wall behind it.

I could hear the sounds of conversation below, dying away and then becoming louder as they said their goodnights. The front door slammed and I heard cars pulling away. After while, Herlene walked across the screen porch and down the walk. Finally, Mrs. Tobbs came clinking up the stairs and came into the room backwards, carrying a silver tray with tea and little cookies. She turned on a lamp which was as dim as the lamps in Frank's room.

"They're gone, thank goodness, and now we can have our tea and relax."

"Mrs. Tobbs, will you help me get a plane and get away without seeing Frank again?"

"Of course I will," she answered, looking suddenly alert.

"Is something wrong?"

"Not really. It's just that I don't understand him or his friends. They're not my kind of people."

"Nor mine. I'm beginning to wish I'd never taken a house guest. I've decided it's best to ignore people like that and just let them go their own way."

I nodded in agreement and sipped my tea, feeling pleasantly drowsy as I listened to Mrs. Tobbs chattering on and on.

THE ANGELS

Louisa Dillard was an old-maid school teacher when she finally married. She had been an old maid ever since high school. Everyone said so and Louisa thought it was God's will, even though she went to tea dances and evening card parties with boys when she was young. She had worn neat patent leather slippers and white cotton gloves and carnations on her wrist. The boys were very courteous and gentle, but their loud voices always startled her. Louisa was as fragile as an angel. She was tiny with small pale features and pale blond hair. She often had visions of angels in heaven and they were as small and pale as she. Sometimes she saw God, but only rarely. God was blond with soft curls and a tender voice.

She wondered sometimes if her visions of angels were signs of an unbalanced mind. She was generally a very intelligent and level-headed person. She had taught her third grade children for twenty years with a down-to-earth, no-nonsense attitude. Her personal life was as strictly ordered as her classes - all except for her angels. She had read in novels of the "voices" many characters heard, but she couldn't associate them with her angels and their conversations. In novels, the voices were usually nothing more exceptional than over-zealous consciences. Her angels resembled very strongly the angels in the Bible storybook she had read over and over when she was a child. She had loved one particular illustration of a baby in its

crib with an angel at its head and foot. She had stared and stared at the angels' faces, loving their tender smiles and their soft, flowing luminosity. She could see the angels come through the wallpaper into her room at night. As she grew older, the angels didn't fade away, but became more frequent visitors and began speaking to her, until finally she stopped thinking of them as visions and accepted them as real angels.

Several different angels had come to her ever since she was a little girl, but she never could keep them straight - they were very much alike and almost transparent, like God. Often she could hear their voices without seeing them. The angels had never told Louisa she would not marry, but they hadn't mentioned it. Most often they told her to stay with her mother and teach the children. She had always lived with her mother in the big brick house with the sun room in Meadows of Dan, Virginia. Her father had died when she was nine, and sometimes she saw him, too, talking with God, or just sitting silently, looking at heaven as he used to sit in the sun room watching the clouds.

Louisa couldn't quite remember when she had decided to marry Benjamin Edwards. She couldn't imagine that he had ever proposed or that she had ever said yes, but they were married in the First Methodist Church and went to Natural Bridge for three days.

After they knew they were going to marry, Benjamin sometimes held her hand and kissed her. He taught mechanical drawing in Patrick High School and shared her love for children. He had no hair on his

hands and his cheeks were always smooth and sweet smelling. When they started to think about getting married, Benjamin came to have dinner with Louisa and her mother almost every evening. Mrs. Dillard was seventy-eight and always sat in the sun room watching television and waiting to join Louisa's father in heaven.

Louisa cooked dinner and brought it in on trays to the sun room. Her mother watched television while they ate and she and Benjamin talked about school. She had taught in the same school room for twenty years. Her students grew up and came to Benjamin to learn how to draw. She loved for him to tell her what they looked like now and how they were doing in school. Benjamin usually had a nut-and-bolt or a spiral of wire in his pocket to help her understand how he taught his students to draw three-dimensional figures. After dinner, Benjamin helped her wash the dishes and water the rows of African violets in the sun room windows. They carefully examined the new blossoms and pinched off the dead soft leaves. Louisa's favorite was the Rex Begonia with its daring coppery jagged leaves. At nine, Benjamin walked home to Mrs. Cassell's boarding house, and Louisa helped her mother to bed.

As she and Benjamin drove toward Natural Bridge, she wanted to talk to an angel. She was worried about their first night together. She thought she would undress in the bathroom and then get in bed and turn out the lights while Benjamin changed. But that way she'd have to come into the room in her robe with him still fully clothed. Perhaps she could ask him to go out for ice. She glanced at Benjamin, wondering if he had found a solution to this problem. He held the wheel tightly

41
and stared straight ahead at the road. The old Plymouth kept creeping up to forty-five miles per hour on the curvy road and he'd have to pump the brakes to slow it down again. Cars and gigantic trucks followed him, almost touching his bumper, and then roared out past him, missing a sideswipe by inches. Louisa respected his careful driving. Benjamin was almost as small as she and certainly wouldn't embarrass her or harm her.

When they drove up to the Natural Bridge Hotel, Louisa unpinned her white orchid and put it in the florist box. She was afraid the corsage would give it away that they were on their honeymoon. After dinner they strolled through the hotel gardens and sat on the front veranda until dark. In their room they watched the Andy Williams show and then Benjamin told her to get ready for bed if she wished while he went for some ice. Louisa smiled to her angel, though she didn't see her, and agreed. She put her long white cotton nightgown over her head and undressed beneath it. She had undressed that way all her life. In the locker room at the high school she had gotten dressed for gym in the shower stall, pulling her petticoat over her head like a tent while she pulled on her gym suit. She could never understand the girls who let others see them in their underwear. And she was shocked by the immodesty of the girls who stepped out of their showers and dried themselves so casually in full view of the others.

Louisa hurried to turn out the lights and get in bed. She lay in the dark listening for Benjamin and then jumped up to turn on the bathroom light so he could see his way. She closed the bathroom door

so that just a sliver of light showed and got back in bed.

She heard Benjamin unlock the door and open it. He stepped in and stopped short in the dark. He took a step back and looked from the number on the door to his key, then peered into the dark. "Louisa?" he whispered.

"Come in, Benjamin. I've finished in the laboratory. The light's on for you."

"But, Louisa, I have a surprise," he said, not moving from the door. "I brought some champagne along. To celebrate. Here's the ice."

"Oh, Benjamin! That's a wonderful surprise. I'd love some."

"May I turn on the light?" he asked softly.

"Oh yes, of course. Just wait til I. . ." she fumbled in the dark, "my bathrobe. . . Now."

Benjamin switched on the light and brought the ice over to the nightstand. "Now, wait just a minute while I get the laboratory glasses and get into my robe." Louisa smiled and watched as he searched in his suitcase for the champagne and his nightclothes. She scooted over to the other side of the bed so he could sit by the nightstand to fix the drinks. He came out in his robe and slippers, carrying the two hotel glasses. "I'm sorry we don't have real champagne glasses," he said, "but this'll do." Louisa watched carefully as Benjamin unwired the bottle top. She jumped when the plastic cork popped out and champagne poured onto the table. Benjamin tried to hold the bottle over the glasses with one hand and put ice into the glasses with the other. "Wait til the ice

chills it," he said, filling the glasses to the top. Louisa sat up and⁴³
propped a pillow behind her. They sipped the champagne and Benjamin
turned the television back on. He propped himself up beside her while
they watched the news and weather. Then he leaned over and kissed her
cheek. He held her hand while they watched the "Tonight Show." They
laughed at the Hollywood comedians and talked about the guest stars.
Benjamin poured a little more champagne into their glasses. Louisa
giggled and said she felt light-headed and shouldn't drink anymore but
he filled her glass anyway.

While the show was still on he took off his slippers and slid
under the covers. A few minutes later he switched off the light. They
lay a while in the dark watching the show. Louisa didn't say a word
when Benjamin put his arm under her shoulders and pulled her down on
the bed until she was lying flat. She couldn't see the television any
more, so she pretended to be half asleep while he kissed her cheek and
forehead again and again.

Very slowly his arm moved under the covers and lightly pulled
her nightgown up and up, not touching her at all. "This is God's will,"
she thought, and made no objection as he slowly rolled himself over
onto her. He wasn't heavy because he propped himself on his elbows. He
buried his face in the pillow beside her head and reached down in
slow motion to his pajamas. She kept her eyes closed and concentrated
on balancing the glass of champagne she still held in her hand. She
started when she felt him between her legs, but he kissed her cheek
again so she tried to smile, even though he couldn't see her. When at

last he entered her, she almost cried with relief. There was no agonizing⁴⁴ pain, no torrents of blood, no grim, bestial awkwardness. In fact, she felt hardly anything at all. He moved ever so slightly back and forth, hardly breathing, keeping his face in the pillow. Suddenly, she felt strangely separated from the world, floating in the clouds like an angel. As she felt herself sail slowly back to earth she was certain she had just experienced a miracle. Benjamin carefully moved over to his side of the bed.

"It was so short," she thought. She wondered why she had ever thought it so dreadful and why people made such a fuss about such a simple thing. She reached over and patted Benjamin's head, and, without even thinking, moved nearer and kissed him on the cheek. He gave a great sigh of contentment and held her hand. After while, she heard him snore. She watched the late news and a choir singing "The Lord's Prayer." When the screen went blank she slipped out of bed. She tiptoed around the bed and found the cork on the floor. She stuck it back in the bottle to save the rest for tomorrow night. She cut off the television and crawled into bed. God's will had been done and it was good.

Louisa thought it was wonderful being a wife. Benjamin had moved in with her and her mother, since that was most convenient. He felt that married women shouldn't work, so she gave up her teaching to keep house and care for her mother. She felt sorry to lose her students, but in the last few years she had noticed that the same children kept coming back year after year, learning everything she had to teach them, going away

for summer vacation, and coming back next fall a year younger to go through it all again. They would never stop coming, so she might as well stop now as twenty years later.

Benjamin had his own room adjoining hers. Some evenings he came into her bedroom in his robe to watch television with her lying on her bed. Later, he would switch off the light and quietly reach under the covers to raise her gown. He would enter her briefly, gently, and then move over to sleep. But on most evenings, they kissed goodnight at nine and slept in their own rooms.

Louisa spent her days working in her garden. She pruned the roses and grape vines and repotted her African violets. The garden was a large one, but since her father died it had become a jungle of honeysuckle and weeds. She worked on small patches at a time, digging weeds, separating bulbs, and slowly bringing order around the house. In the afternoons she worked on her school scrapbook, arranging all the photos and newsclippings by years and then pasting them in. She read a textbook on mechanical drawing which Benjamin brought home from school. She was amazed at his intricate knowledge of mechanical things. He made many repairs on the old house, and each afternoon after school he toured the garden with her and praised her progress. They sat in garden chairs until dinner time discussing the garden and Benjamin's students; then, Benjamin went into the sun room to read the paper and try to talk with Mrs. Dillard.

As Mrs. Dillard grew worse, Louisa and Benjamin drew closer to each other. Doctor King came regularly to check her but said there was

nothing wrong but age. He sat in the garden with them and sipped Louisa's special Russian tea. "She'll be harder to communicate with as time goes by," he said, "but there's no reason to move her to a hospital with you to care for her."

"Do you think we should have a nurse for her, Doctor?" asked Benjamin. "It's hard on Louisa helping her to the bathroom and back and forth from her chair."

"It would be a good idea, but nurses are hard to find around here." Doctor King sipped his tea and looked at Louisa with unusual intentness. "Come to think of it, you don't look well. How long has it been since you've had a checkup?"

Louisa felt suddenly shy with both men staring at her. "Oh, Prentiss, you know I've always looked feeble. I'm all right."

"Well, I'm glad you've given up teaching. Those children were draining all your strength. I've told you for years to take it easy. You've always been slightly anemic." Doctor King stood up and finished his tea. "I must go. Come to my office tomorrow, Louisa. Goodby, Benjamin."

Louisa nodded goodby and thought to herself that she had felt weaker lately from working so much in her garden. Her tiny body had always felt weak and useless to her. She knew she looked older than her age, with her almost white blond hair and her delicate skin going to fine lines. Lately, her back had ached inordinately after working in the garden. She felt a flutter of fear and resolved to get Wyoming Tarpin to help in the garden even though he charged fifty cents an hour and

pulled up the periwinkle with the weeds. Just then she noticed an angel sitting on the stone wall by the maple. The angel with long golden curls, dressed in an exquisite gauzy robe, smiled mysteriously and said, "Don't worry, my darling child, you're not ill. Don't tire yourself in the garden. Why are you afraid when we care for you?"

"Oh!" said Louisa in a whisper, "I'm so glad you're here. I'm not afraid, but you haven't come for so long."

"You haven't thought of us."

"I know. I'm so happy with Benjamin. You've been so good to me."

Louisa blinked away the tears the thought of her happiness brought to her eyes, and looked up, but the angel had gone.

The next day in Doctor King's office, she sat waiting for him to finish the checkup. "Well, I'll be damned!" he said. "Pardon my French, but, Louisa, you're pregnant!"

"Oh, Prentiss! It can't be! I'm too old!"

"Now, Louisa," he said with a coy look, "you're only a bit over forty and in good health. Why not?"

"Oh, but, Prentiss, I'm so embarrassed!"

She told Benjamin in the afternoon while they were sitting in the sun room. It was chilly in the evenings and they went inside earlier. Benjamin was extremely excited and hugged her almost roughly. "A son! We're going to have a son! Did you hear that, Mother?" he said loudly. Mrs. Dillard smiled vaguely toward him and may have heard.

Louisa rarely left the house during the next months. It was a bitter cold winter and Benjamin brought home the groceries and did

her other errands for her. All winter she made plans and talked with her angels about her son. She was certain it would be a boy and the angel never said it wouldn't. When the baby boy was finally born, small and weak, she and Benjamin named him Jonathan Dillard for her father and called him Jon.

Jon was a delicate child, frail and thin like his mother, frequently sick and once almost dead from pneumonia. He had milky, transparent skin, his little veins showing even in his face, and large blue eyes. He was unnaturally quiet for a baby, rarely crying, looking as though he were thinking deeply. Benjamin and Louisa watched wonderingly, hardly believing he was theirs, caring for him like doting, slightly fearful grandparents.

When Jon was a year old, Mrs. Dillard died in the night. Louisa hardly grieved at all, she was so intent upon little Jon. She looked for her mother in heaven, and sometimes thought she could see her, young and beautiful again, off at a distance, but it may have been one of the angels.

Jon became stronger as he grew from a baby to a child, though he never seemed as healthy as his playmates. Louisa was secretly proud of his resemblance to her, but she worried because he seemed, as she always had, somehow much older and more serious than his age. When Jon reached the elementary grades, she felt more at ease with him and taught him at home what the younger school teachers couldn't teach. Benjamin hoped his son would get to high school before he retired, but he and Louisa both felt too old and tired to keep up with him.

Jon liked to work in the garden with his mother from the time he first found bugs to eat under the rocks. Even in high school when his friends thought it was sissy to garden with his mother, he planted vegetables and weeded. Louisa sat on a stool and weeded the high places, but usually she watched Jon work. He had become a handsome young man, she thought, with his soft blue eyes and blond hair and the milky white skin he'd had since he was a baby. She sat and admired his white hands working the rich black earth, and tried to answer his questions. He wanted to know all about her angels. "I see them, too," he said, "and I talk to God every night."

"What does God say to you, Jon?"

"Oh, he tells me to study and listen to you, and not to mind my headaches."

"Do they still bother you so much?"

"Not like they used to. It's been a while since I've had one."

"I think Prentiss is getting too old to be a doctor. There must be some remedy besides aspirin and those little pills. Migraine headaches, even when you were a baby! How can they be part of your nervous system? I think he just doesn't know what to do about them."

"No, he's right. God said not to mind my headaches because I'll always have them. . ."

"Jon! He didn't say that!"

"Yes, He did, Mother. He told me to ignore them and to work harder on my poems."

"But, Jon, your poems are beautiful. Your teacher said so. I

love the one about this garden."

Louisa was furious with God for saying such things to Jon. His poems were lovely, all about flowers and love and God. Even the one about death was beautiful and reassuring. Jon's teacher had asked permission to use that one in the high school magazine. Jon's friends called him "Joanie" and said poetry was for girls, but his teachers said he was wise beyond his years and his poems were very deep.

Louisa and Benjamin dreaded Jon's graduation. He seemed too little and young to leave them for college. Benjamin was going to retire next year, so it would be difficult to pay for his education, even with Jon's scholarship and their pensions. But Jon was determined to go and Benjamin was glad, too, since he wanted to study to be a teacher. The day Jon left for school Louisa wandered through the house and sat in the garden, unconsciously weeding with her eyes. Her angel had become a daily visitor during the last year. The angel let her talk more now, and even allowed her to admit her anger at God for belittling Jon's poetry.

"Don't be concerned, my darling," said the angel, who still sat primly at a distance, "God's plan for Jon is good. He can be a teacher through his poetry if he works to please Him instead of you. It's wrong to be angry when you don't understand."

Louisa sighed at her confusion and tried to understand why God gave Jon such terrible headaches and wanted him to work so hard. She felt her own body ache in sympathy and felt the heaviness of her age. The lines in her face had deepened like the apple dolls she used to

make. Her body was light and dried up and made her envy the angel's soft youth.

Jon wrote to her several times a week at first, sending new poems with his letters. The poems were still about God and beauty, but she couldn't understand them any more. There was so much about pain in the world and about death being a gift. The lines were shorter and didn't rhyme like his old poems. She couldn't understand the parts about life-in-death and death-in-life.

Jon had been away for two months when a call came from the university infirmary saying that Jon was very ill and was on his way home to be cared for by the family physician. Louisa called Benjamin home from the high school and waited silently with him in the garden. The university limosine drove up at dinner time and the driver helped Benjamin support Jon to the sun room bed. Jon was almost asleep from drugs, but his jaws were tight with pain even in his sleep. Louisa was shocked to see how much he had aged while he was away. They were working him too hard, she thought, and not feeding him enough. His white blond hair had thinned so that the outline of his skull was clearly visible and his skin was pallid and tight over his delicate bones. Dr. King came and told them this bout would pass like the others and simply to wait.

When Jon woke in the morning Louisa could see that the pain had gone. "Morning, Mother, sorry to scare you like this. Must have been worse than the other times."

"Other times? At school? You never told me. Why didn't you

tell me?"

"Nothing you could do, Mother. Just a few times anyway, and usually it passed in a day or so. I tried to explain it up there, but I think they were afraid they'd have a dead body on their hands."

"Oh, Jon! Don't talk like that. You're all right now."

"Yes, it won't get me this time. Say, I forgot to tell you. Just before I got sick, Doctor Hedges said he wanted to publish some of my poems. How about that?"

"That's wonderful! I just wish I could understand what you've been writing lately. It's so confusing."

Jon laughed, "It's nice to hear you say that after what some of the people up there have said. They say it's too elementary and idealistic. If it weren't for Doctor Hedges, I'd never see a poem in print."

"But Jon, they shouldn't say things like that."

"Oh, they're very practical men. They say my ideas about life and afterlife are silly and superstitious. They call me 'Preacher Jon' and tell me I'm pious and sentimental. But I don't really care. I just write what I want to write."

Jon stayed home for a week, writing even when the pain came again, and Louisa insisted on watching him constantly. He mumbled to himself as he wrote and wrote. She looked at the sheets of writing while he slept and found them illegible. When he left for school, he kissed her tenderly and seemed to her to be very close and very much her son. But when he came home for Christmas vacation, he was almost a stranger, intent upon his poems, with little time to relax and talk.

During that winter, she and Benjamin grew tired and more silent as they watched Jon live so fast. In February, a book of his poetry was published by the University Press. The poems were almost all about death as God's gift and about the suffering of life. After reading one of Jon's newest poems, she and Benjamin stared at each other and wondered how Jon knew so much of man's suffering and how he could know so certainly the way to live. She came to hate critics and reviewers. They were all, they said, offended by his "self-righteous didacticism." His "lessons" were absurd and unrealistic in today's world. His ideas about God's grace and the glory of afterlife were primitive and immature.

Jon wrote to them very rarely and only came home once during that spring semester. He never spoke of his headaches and just laughed when Louisa condemned the critics. "Some people will listen to me and that's all I care," he said.

When the weather became warm enough, Louisa spent every day sitting in the garden, telling Wyoming where to plant the annuals and thinking of Jon. Jon, the poet, was mixed up with Jon, the child, in her thoughts. She pictured him bending beside her over the flowers, working the dirt with his little hands. All spring she sat in the garden, or in the sun room on rainy days, remembering her baby, watching him grow up again in her mind.

In June, when a call came from the university telling her that Jon had been found dead in his room, she saw a child's body slumped on the rug, just as she had found him once when he fell from pain. The fact of Jon's death didn't pierce her memories of her child for many days.

Doctor Hedges came to speak his sympathy and his desire to publish Jon's last poems. Louisa offered him tea and tried to concentrate on his words. Benjamin retired into his own suffering when he discovered that Louisa's grief was unapproachable.

She woke early one morning after Doctor Hedges' visit to discover that her own moaning had awakened her. Her loneliness was suddenly so real and powerful she couldn't move from her bed. She had never felt so helpless before her own emotions. She made herself get up and fix tea, and wandered into the garden, hazy and damp in the early light. In the garden near the angel's favorite spot she saw a young boy kneeling over the flowers. "Jon!" she called and stopped still. Jon stood up and walked toward her, smiling. He was young again without the tense lines around his eyes and mouth.

"Hello, Mother," he said. "I'm glad I can be here with you. I'll stay with you."

"Oh, Jon, you're with the angels. There's no pain in your eyes."

"Yes, Mother. I'm safe now with God and the angels. I'm glad I'm here. Don't worry any more. I'm happy and I'll be with you as long as you want me."

She sat down in her garden chair watching him working with the flowers. Sometimes he'd leave for awhile and then she'd talk to her angel or to herself. She sent Wyoming away when he came to weed, saying she'd take care of it from now on.

As the days and weeks went by, she watched her skin grow more transparent and remembered sometimes to eat and to go to bed. Benjamin

watched her from a distance, afraid and humble before her glassy eyes and absentminded mumbling. He puttered around the house half-heartedly, trying to keep some order in their days and a semblance of neatness in the garden. He consulted Doctor King, desperate in his isolation and helplessness.

Doctor King said that her mourning kept her from her neglected garden and house, and that eventually she would recover from her sorrow. He shook his head sadly at the weeds and clutter which once again choked out the flowers. Louisa looked to him as unkempt as her garden, with food stains on her dress and her hair escaping in ragged patches from her torn hairnet.

Benjamin brought groceries home every day and finally found a maid to live in. Often, he sat and talked to Louisa, trying to draw her out of herself and back to him. His talking annoyed Louisa because it interrupted her visits with Jon. She and Jon worked together, weeding and admiring the flowers as they bloomed, while he explained his poetry. She had broken through her confusion and understood him with a clarity and gladness she had never known before. Sometimes she'd watch herself kneeling beside Jon over the flowers and think that she'd never been as happy in her life.

THE GREAT BRIDGE

Snyder Williams and his wife Pauline were on their second honeymoon. Pauline had been saving grocery change and Christmas money for thirty years for this trip, meanwhile raising three boys, putting up vegetables and taking in sewing. Snyder had set aside profits from cabbages and honey bees as his New York money. His farm near Rose Hill, Virginia, gave him a decent income - "bread money" they called it - and Pauline's sewing brought in the "cake money."

Snyder and Pauline had dreamed and planned for this trip ever since they had married. The farthest from home either of them had been was Cudjo's Motel twenty miles west of Rose Hill, where they had spent their wedding night. They had toured Cudjo's Cavern the next morning before driving home. Since it was planting time when they were married, their honeymoon could last no longer than one night and a day. It seemed as if it were always planting time, or harvest time, or a drought, or they were snowed in when they thought of a trip.

Snyder was perfectly content to stay at home forever. He belonged there, he loved it, he felt very little curiosity about other places. He spent all his days working in his fields or in his barn, waking before dawn to the huge breakfast Pauline prepared every morning, then going out to the day's chores. Smokey, his hired man, who was almost deaf, ate with him, neither saying a word, Smokey knowing exactly what had to be done without being told. In the fields Snyder worked instinctively,

Smokey beside him helping. When his boys grew old enough to wonder, they saw him handle tender green tobacco shoots with such care and examine the cows and chickens with such authority that their own love for the land and animals developed without their being aware of it. He talked to the children about the farm, explaining why he must fertilize and why the pond was low this year; but mostly, he was silent, not needing to talk or even to think consciously about it to know that he was alive and doing something important.

In the evenings, he relaxed by the fire, or on the porch in the summer, smoking his pipe, sometimes reading the Farmers' Almanac or the section of the Sears Roebuck catalogue on farm equipment. He and Pauline drove in to Spenser's Store every Saturday for supplies and groceries. He'd talk awhile to the other farmers while Pauline shopped. Every Sunday they drove in to the Mt. Holiness Baptist Church and chatted with their neighbors after the service. Smokey never left the farm either for supplies or to go to church.

Because of Pauline's enthusiasm, Snyder had slowly developed a desire to see New York, too. Pauline was reticent by nature, but her travel magazines and drawerful of clippings about New York made her dream obvious to him. Pauline went into town more frequently than Snyder, meeting at the home of one or another of her friends to sew and to plan the next church social or the next wedding. One of her friends, Doreen, had a TV in her front room, so her house was the favorite meeting place. The ladies watched the quiz games and listened carefully as Doreen explained what had happened to certain soap opera characters

since they had last met at her house. The women had long since told each other their favorite daydreams, most of which involved travel and the luxury of being waited upon; meanwhile, they stayed at home, waiting upon their husbands and children and keeping their houses in order year after year.

Now Snyder and Pauline were finally in New York. They looked tired, heavy, and timid, but Pauline tried to flirt with Snyder and he led her through the crowds by putting his arm around her for the first time in many years.

They walked around Rockefeller Center, along Fifth Avenue, rode to the top of the Empire State Building, and saw a TV quiz show - all in one day. Then Pauline went back to their hotel room to rest and write post cards, and Snyder, too excited to relax, decided to walk down to see the big boats in the Hudson River.

When he returned later in the afternoon he looked so proud and mischievous that Pauline's curiosity woke her from her sleepy daze. "Pauline," he announced, "I have a surprise for you." His smile turned coy and guilty as he tried to guess her reaction. "I have just bought the George Washington Bridge."

"Oh, Snyder!" she said, laughing, "you mean the Brooklyn Bridge!" She was amused by his sudden and rather old-fashioned humor.

He didn't smile. "No," he said, looking confused, "it's the George Washington Bridge." His confidence grew as he added, "See, here's the deed, signed and official. Paid cash. I met the owner down by the river and he was so anxious to sell that he gave it to me for five

hundred dollars. Ain't that a deal, now!"

"Oh, Snyder! I don't believe it! You couldn't have done such a thing!"

"Look here. Read this deed and maybe you'll believe me. Oh, I know it's a lot of money, but wait til you see it!"

"Oh, dear," she sighed. "I guess it's really true then."

She was so used to his straight-forward honesty that she had to believe him, although she could hardly comprehend such folly. She thought of the five hundred dollars and how hard they had worked for it as Snyder bustled around trying to get her ready to go out and see their bridge. He told her all about the deal as they went down on the elevator and along the street - about his cleverness in bargaining from a thousand to five hundred dollars, about the owner's nervousness at having to sell "due to bad luck on the stock market" as he had said, and their final handshake on the deal.

On their first glimpse of the bridge Pauline felt almost the same thrill as Snyder. Although fantasy was foreign to her, she experienced for a moment the deep pleasure and sense of power owning the bridge would bring. Snyder touched the heavy steel handrail proudly and watched the river and barges moving under him. It was dusk and the lights on the bridge suddenly lit up like a good omen. He stood and watched the mighty stream of cars and trucks pushing across the bridge. The great steel cables shone like gold in the last light of the sun. The heavy smog settling along the river made the other bank vague and hazy so that the bridge seemed to hang suspended. Pauline stared at

Snyder, seeing his pride and grand possessiveness even in his grip on the handrail. She dreaded telling him how he had been swindled, and put off the moment again and again as she observed his new authority and self-confidence.

Finally, they walked back to their bus stop and went on to dinner and a movie at Times Square. Pauline watched wonderingly when, with quiet assurance, Snyder looked the ticket girl in the eye and asked for two seats near the front. As the movie began, she had to remind herself that she was in New York, at Times Square, watching a movie in cinemascope. Her mind wandered even from this once-in-a-lifetime spectacle. She accustomed herself to the fact that their five hundred dollars was gone and that their trip would have to be cut short drastically. It was no use getting worked up over something done and final. She had an impulse to giggle, then, thinking how stupid it was of Snyder to be taken in by such an old sucker-gimmick. She tried to stifle her giggle and to concentrate on the movie. But then, she thought suddenly, how could he have heard of the joke and swindles like that? All he ever talked, read, and thought was the farm. Her thoughts lost words as images appeared and overlapped in her mind, of Snyder on the plow - bending over a row of young tobacco - sitting in church absently watching the wasps on the ceiling - eating dinner, oblivious to the children's chatter. Finally, a thought made Pauline sit absolutely still, her heart and breath stopped. How could Snyder know anything about anything other than farming? The question faded and she relaxed in her chair, feeling such compassion for her husband and his innocence

that she was lightheaded. She turned to smile at him and took his hand. He grinned back and stretched his legs out more comfortably. Pauline felt very much alone and very much needed. Strolling after the movie, they were quiet, and not nearly as impressed by the neon of Times Square and the milling crowds as they had expected to be.

Before it was daylight next morning, Snyder dressed and tiptoed out of their room and took the bus to a stop several blocks from his bridge. He wanted to slow pleasure of approaching on foot. It was even more beautiful in the morning half-light. The great piers were black and wet from the sloshing waves of the tugboats. The towering girders were bold and clean and high beyond imagination in the morning mist. The roar of the cars and trucks was magnificent. He walked along the sidewalk to the middle of the bridge, making an effort to appear casual. He counted his steps to the middle, doubled the figure and set the length of the bridge at about a mile. He picked up an old candy wrapper and threw it over the side. He estimated that the towers were about 1,000 feet high. He tried to count the cars as they passed, estimating 30 per minute per lane times 8 lanes equals 240 per minute times, let's see, 60 minutes per hour, that's about 50,000 per hour times. . . Finally, in figures beyond comprehension he gave up. He thought that if he charged just a small toll, say a nickle a car, he could make several thousand dollars a day, and in one month he would have. . . No, he told himself, he was not going to be a miserly landlord. He would allow everyone the freedom to drive across his bridge without cost. He sighed in relief as he abandoned his figuring and smiled benignly at the

people who were driving freely by, because of his generosity.

On their way home on the train Pauline and Snyder talked it over and decided not to tell anyone of their acquisition. Snyder spoke condescendingly but with sympathy of their simple friends who would perhaps be afraid or uneasy around the owners of the George Washington Bridge.

In spite of his silence on this subject, Snyder sensed his own new importance and his friends' awareness of something different about him. He resumed work in his fields with new energy and he profited as he never had before. In keeping with his importance he felt the need of improving his land. He had the house and barn painted inside and out. He bought a fine electric organ, and slowly acquired a large assortment of modern farm implements. He hired two extra farm hands and started talking of clearing his woodlands for lumber and new pasture land. Later, he began buying Black Angus at the farmers' auctions, until he could speak of his "cattle" instead of his cows. In just a few years, he had doubled his farmland and had an income far beyond his needs. He kept the deed to the bridge in a locked box in his desk and reread it privately several times a week.

Pauline worried about her husband as their farm grew and he became more and more involved with men and finance. She was afraid that somehow he would discover that his purchase of the bridge would, in the eyes of the world, make him a sucker and a fool. She trembled, imagining him returning home one day bent and silent again, avoiding supervision of his new men and machines, working out in the fields with Smokey and

his old plow. She dreaded the day and prayed that Snyder would escape the ruinous knowledge. She loved him the way he had become, much more alert and a bit more talkative, making plans for their future and for their children.

The children had somehow become young men, active and intelligent, helping their father with the farm. Pauline sensed that Snyder had lived most of his life like an animal — his farming and living determined by nature's cycles rather than by his own will. She had an inkling that she, too, had lived her life like an animal, domesticated, perhaps, neat and efficient like a cat which washes itself and buries its waste. Her children had been her kittens, cute nuisances, always needing bathing or feeding. She was not disgusted with herself or with him by the comparison with animals that lingered in her mind. She thought of that way of life as "before the bridge."

At Christmas time three years after the purchase of the bridge, Snyder turned over the management of the farm temporarily to his oldest son while they took a two-week vacation in New York. Neither of them could move away permanently from their friends and the clean country air, but Snyder especially wanted to spend more than a few days at a time with his bridge.

When their oldest son said goodbye to Pauline at the train station he kissed her cheek and joked, "Don't let them sell Pop the Brooklyn Bridge! Ho! Ho!" Pauline jerked away to look for Snyder. He and the other two boys were putting the suitcases onto the train and hadn't heard the remark. She turned back with a rare violence and said, "Don't you

64
ever say that again! Don't you ever tease your father about his ignorance of city ways!"

She still trembled as their train pulled out of the station, but she had calmed herself enough to smile weakly as they passed the boys on the platform and to blow a kiss to temper her harsh words.

They had corresponded with a New York real estate man and had found a furnished room in a neighborhood described as "clean" which had one overwhelming (and previously stipulated) advantage - a view of the bridge. Pauline, on their arrival in New York, went directly to their room to unpack and settle down. Snyder said he might take a little ride to see the sights, so after seeing Pauline and the luggage to a cab, he got on a bus marked "Geo.Wash.Brdg." and sat impatiently as the bus wove through the endless streets.

A glimpse of steel cables. A fragment of a tower between the shoulders of the bus passengers. And then, at the bus stop, a view of the whole bridge in all its massiveness and strength. Snyder walked quickly through the crowds and at last stepped onto his bridge. It had changed very little during the years he was away. There seemed to be more pigeons, or were they seagulls, circling over the bridge, and more of their droppings on the cables and rails. The white droppings etched out the bright lines and made the shadows of the cables darker and blacker. He felt a sudden urge to climb a tower and to see his bridge from above, but his dizziness even at the thought of the climb held him to the sidewalk.

He leaned over the railing to inspect the piers and followed

the river with his eyes. He would come to his bridge every day of their vacation. He thought of looking into the possibility of purchasing another bridge, but the thought passed quickly. One bridge was enough for any man. He turned around to look again at his bridge. He wondered how the bridge would look if it were empty - no cars, no people. He decided that he would come back that night, maybe at three or four in the morning and see if the lights were still on and see if there were ever a time when he could be absolutely alone with his bridge.